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ABSTRACT

The concept of access is central to any discussion of issues confronting the community college. The search for creative and effective ways of pursuing access involves examining institutional practices and state policies to define access in a way that will satisfy the need for acceptable standards and quality. Issues to be addressed in searching for alternative ways of preserving access include what students should have access to; the conditions under which students should have access to education and under which postsecondary education should be available; and whose education the states should subsidize and for how long. In dealing with these important access issues some strategies should be kept in mind. First, community colleges ought to define quality in ways that can be measured and avoid body counts as evidence of accomplishments. Second, states should place a high priority on ensuring articulation among the various components of postsecondary educational systems. Third, there needs to be agreement about program priorities within each state. Finally, dialogue is needed about the kinds of access a state believes should have priority, conditions under which access is to occur, and the most effective methods of funding to ensure that the state's policies are fully implemented. (LAL)

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Comments Prepared for the WICHE Legislative Workshop:
Community Colleges at the Crossroads
September 28, 1985
Eugene, Oregon

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ACCESS
Comments Prepared for the WICHE Legislative Workshop:
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In many ways, the concept of access is central to any discussion of issues confronting the community college. In other ways it interferes with our ability to come to grips with the issue of quality that has assumed a dominant role in policy discussions of the 80s.

Among many policy makers, access has become almost a non-issue. While there may continue to be a few who believe that higher education should be reserved for an intellectual elite, it would be unusual to find elected representatives willing to speak publicly against the idea of providing every person who wants to go to college with the opportunity to do so.

Given that we are of one mind on the desirability of making opportunities for higher education as widely available as our resources will permit, one might wonder why we are gathered indoors on a beautiful Fall Saturday morning to discuss the issue of access. In part, the answer is a simple one. Just as patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel, so is access the last refuge of community college educators who believe the idea of educating everyone is so powerful that it is unnecessary to examine the outcomes being achieved by implementation.

Those who support access as a matter of dogma respond to questions about quality or standards by accusing those who raise them of being against access. Such accusations naturally cause a certain amount of uneasiness among our minority brothers and sisters who have observed the effects of rising university admission standards in reduced percentages of minority students attending, and at the same time, their proportion of the college aid population has increased.

While there are some who are genuinely concerned that open-access may be lost to the rising tide of public interest in quality and standards, there are others with less worthy motives to avoid the inconvenience and uncertainty that examining past practices might produce. Access, if you will, has become the bully pulpit from which those who question some of the side effects of the methods chosen to implement access may be denounced.

For those who oppose change, the solution involves reliving the parable of the Good Shepherd. Whenever anyone questions any of our practices, we tell them in great detail about how we found the lost sheep. What they really want to know is what happened to the other 99 while we were gone. But by the time we have finisned telling them for the tenth time all the places we looked, and the obstacles we overcame, and how grateful the lost sheep was when we finally found him or her, their eyes have glazed over. We believe we have been persuasive only to discover to our dismay that when our listeners return to the feed store, they send only enough grain to feed about 60 of our sheep.

But community colleges need not respond to concerns about quality and standards by raising admission requirements. Neither should they equate such

concerns with the desire to limit access. There are alternatives for preserving access without giving up standards, but their pursuit will require legislative understanding and support. So, I think we are present this morning, not so much to debate the settled question of access, as to examine institutional practices and state policies to determine if there are not more creative and effective ways of pursuing access that will at the same time satisfy our desire to have acceptable standards and quality.

To find those alternatives, I am going to suggest that we address four questions. The first of these is, access to what?

Do we believe that we must provide everyone with the right to participate: a) in the first two-years of a baccalaureate degree program; b) in one or two-year vocational and technical programs designed to prepare individuals for immediate employment or to upgrade those already employed; c) in short-term training or retraining to meet the needs of business, industry or government, or unemployed workers; d) in unlimited remediation in writing, math, reading, and English as a second language; e) in individual credit courses for personal enrichment; f) in recreation and leisure time activities; g) in credit-free courses in poodle grooming and cake baking on a self-supporting basis, or h) all of the above?

The second major question is access under what conditions? If resources are constrained, what priorities do we establish among the functions noted above, all of which have been defended to the death at one time or another by community college educators? Do we, for example, admit everyone to everything regardless of their level of preparation? Do we guarantee to students their

"right to fail" by allowing disregard of evidence provided by test scores and their previous performance as well as the advice of counselors; and permitting them to enroll in any course for which there is no prerequisite course? Many who believe in open access no longer believe in the right to fail. They are concerned about the effect of those who are exercising their right to fail have on the right of others to succeed. This is a particularly difficult problem when students are permitted to enroll in baccalaureate oriented courses in subject fields such as history and political science, without the necessary reading and writing skills that ought to be required to pass such courses.

And, should we focus on the 18 to 22 year old population, the working population, or all of the above? And what about the special case of minorities who depend upon the community college for their access to a much greater extent than do their non-minority counterparts?

If community colleges do not assess the skills of students who enter and then require placement according to demonstrated skills, how can they avoid providing separate and unequal opportunities for those who have no alternative but to attend colleges where course standards must be adapted to reflect the underprepared students exercising their right to fail?

A third question in responding to the issue of access, involves the conditions under which postsecondary education ought to be available. Should it be offered to all who seek it? Or, should it be a consumer good hawked in the shopping malls alongside sale priced clothing and the latest hit record-

ing? Some educators would emphasize the importance of marketing in shopping centers in order to achieve the true democratization of higher education. Others might respond by noting the importance of enrollments to community college funding and suggesting an ulterior motive.

There is also a growing concern about the message community colleges send to high schools as a consequence of their recruiting and admissions practices. Why should students spend time taking tough subjects in high school if they are guaranteed admission to a community college and their right to fail? Or, even better, if they can count upon being pursued in shopping centers whether they graduate from high school or not.

A fourth question deals with state subsidies and for how long? Should a student be given three years of the right to fail? Should there be any expectations for progress during that period of time or any requirements that community colleges track students, and account for the number of classes successfully completed? Should states subsidize part-time students as well as full-time students. Of course, this question implies a choice since no state has been able to fund fully both its part-time and full-time students. So perhaps the question should be phrased instead, should the state devote part of its available subsidy to part-time rather than full-time students?

And, should states subsidize as college students those who are engaged in basic literacy training, who will never earn a degree or certificate because their deficiencies will mean that they run out of time long before they have qualified for a regular program. If the state decides that the community college is the appropriate place to provide English as a Second Language for

recent immigrants, and basic literacy training for those whose skills are below, let's say the 6th grade level, should community colleges be required to treat such instruction as if it were college level training in terms of calculating the basis for reimbursement? Should students who attend such training be reqired to enter into some sort of subterfuge with the institution in order to remain eligible for student financial assistance?

In dealing with the important access issues identified above, there are some stategies that should be kept in mind. First of all, community colleges ought to be encouraged whenever possible to define quality in ways that can be measured. They should not be permitted to submit body counts as the evidence of their accomplishments.

Second, states need to place a very high priority on insuring articulation among the differing elements of their postsecondary systems. In many states, the competition that has developed because of a declining student pool, makes competition rather than cooperation the guiding principle for relationships between community colleges and four-year colleges and universities, all of which are funded out of the State Treasury. Enrollment-driven funding formulas contribute to the level of competition, and sometimes encourage institutions to admit students they have no business attempting to serve.

There also needs to be some reasonable agreement about program priorities within each state. The legislature should not have to depend upon general funding cuts to express displeasure about areas of mission emphasis. One important function this workshop could serve would be to begin a dialogue about what kinds of access each state believes should receive priority, the

conditions under which such access is to occur, and the most effective methods of funding to insure that state policies are fully implemented.

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